

**“Seeds of Hope:  
Reflections from Peru”  
GROWING STORIES:  
The Parables of Jesus**

August 25, 2019

Mark 12:29-31 and Luke 8:4-8  
Covenant Presbyterian Church,  
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The core of the Christian gospel is love. The best-known verse in the Bible is about God’s love: “For God so loved the world, that he sent his only Son....” says John 3.16.

And you just heard the essence of our response, the basic responsibility of Christians: Love God and love neighbor.

Here at Covenant, our calling is to learn about God’s love, and then to live God’s love, to make in real in our daily interactions.

We are loved, so that we can love others. We are blessed to be a blessing. Or as we say here at Covenant, our calling is learning God love for the purpose of living God’s love.

So that all sounds good, learning and living, loving our neighbors. But how do we really do it our world today?

In an age of warmer temperatures, severe weather, and growing concern about plastics, many theologians are saying that in order to love our neighbors, to really love our neighbors, we have to take better care of the planet.

If you love your neighbors as yourself,

- you want both them and you to be able to breathe, so you need to love clean fresh air;
- you want them and you to be able to drink, so you need to love pure water in all its forms;
- you want them and you to be able to eat, so you need to care about the climate and about soil and about fisheries, fields, farms, and forests;
- you will want all your children and your future descendants to be able to enjoy the beauty of creation too, so you will care about conservation and you will see ecology as a beautiful and holy science.

--Brian McLaren

*The Great Spiritual Migration: How the World's Largest Religion  
is Seeking a Better Way to Be Christian*

Brian McLaren is one of those theologians. In his book, *The Great Spiritual Migration*, he wrote about how the church is a school of love, and if we're seriously going to love our neighbors, we have to take better care of the planet.



So with high hopes of loving our neighbors and learning how to better care for our planet, 12 of us from Covenant went to Peru earlier this month.

Our group of six teens and six adults started in Lima and then spent most of our time in central Peru, far from the touristy regions, near Huancayo. This part of the country is known for mining, and we were based in the small city of La Oroya.

Nestled in the Andes at 12,000 feet, La Oroya is in a beautiful setting, but the beauty is tainted. As you enter the city, the dominant feature is the smokestack on the metallurgical complex which has been there for about 90 years.

With lax enforcement of already lenient environmental regulations, the metal processing smelter has generated obscene amounts of pollution. A study ten years ago classified La Oroya as one of the ten most polluted cities in the world.

The water, the soil, and the air are all polluted. The nearby mountains are coated with a white glaze, which looks like frosting, but it's actually sulphur dioxide from acid rain.

One study showed that 99% of children in La Oroya have lead poisoning. The local health center is surrounded by polluted hillsides.



While the metallurgical complex provides jobs for many people, there is growing concern about the pollution and about corruption at high levels in the Peruvian government.

Several former presidents of the country are in jail, and one former president committed suicide earlier this year, just before he was to be arrested on corruption charges, relating to favors given to large corporations.

So the problems of pollution and corruption are deep-rooted and complicated.

We were invited to journey to La Oroya by Jed and Jenny Koball, Presbyterian Mission Co-Workers for many years in Peru. Jenny works with the Young Adult Volunteer program, and Jed works with a network of social services organizations, working together to fight poverty's root causes.

Jed has been working with the people of La Oroya for about ten years now. At the conclusion of our orientation meeting with him, he encouraged us to be awed by nature, to find joy in people, and to thirst for understanding.

That seems like a good attitude to have as we turn to our second reading for today from Luke.

Our parable today from Luke 8 is about seeds and soil, with the hope of good things growing. Variations appear in Matthew and Mark.

With hope that God would tease our minds into active thought, listen for God's word from Luke 8:

When a great crowd gathered and people from town after town came to him, he said in a parable: "A sower went out to sow his seed; and as he sowed, some fell on the path and was trampled on, and the birds of the air ate it up. Some fell on the rock; and as it grew up, it withered for lack of moisture. Some fell among thorns, and the thorns grew with it and choked it. Some fell into good soil, and when it grew, it produced a hundredfold." As he said this, he called out, "Let anyone with ears to hear listen!"

On our mission trip to Peru, I saw seeds of hope growing in three separate ways.

**1. One way seeds of hope are growing is where people have planted trees.** In La Oroya, we spent our time with a delightful group of teenage environmentalists,



who are working in their communities to improve the environment. We visited one of those communities, called Huari, where we planted several trees at the school.

On another day, we visited community just outside of La Oroya, a small community organization has planted over 30,000 on the hillsides outside of and upwind of La Oroya. This community was founded 20 years ago by Mama Toya, who is now 83 and continues to work hard, for the sake of her community. We planted more trees and did some irrigation work as well.

So I saw seeds of hope growing into trees.

## 2. I also saw seeds of hope growing in artwork.

At Huari, in addition to planting trees, we made posters celebrating creation care for the school. It was fun to work together with the Peruvian teens. On a different day, we painted three separate murals celebrating creation.



Our posters and murals won't be in a museum any time soon, but I really like the idea of making art to cast a vision of transformation and hope for a better world.

**3. And perhaps most significantly I saw seeds hope planted in us,** with the hope of transformation, for us and for the Peruvians. I am particularly hopeful about the teenagers.

Together, the Peruvian and Covenant teens played soccer and basketball, musical chair and other games. Many strong connections were made among the kids.

After a few days of planting trees and doing art and playing games together, we spent an intense morning sharing information and encouragement.



They told us about the work they were doing in their schools, homes, and communities. They are trying to get more recycling and better trash pickups going, they are speaking and leading art projects in their schools, they are asking questions about mining practices, they are trying to make this world a better place.

They were interested in our environmental concerns as well, so we told them about Wisconsin farming and lakes, about recycling and hybrid cars and solar panels. We told them about our green team at church and they seemed impressed.

It was a blessing to be among these teenagers as they mutually encouraged and supported each other to better care for the world.

You can read about our trip in the report. It was linked in our weekly email, and hard copies are at church. It was a great trip. Thanks be to God. That would be a great place to end the sermon. But not quite yet.

I don't believe that mission trips end when participants get back home, do their laundry, and catch up on sleep. A mission trip isn't simply about going to help someone else. It's about learning to live in a new way.

On the long trip home, I read a short book called *Enough: Discovering Joy Through Simplicity and Generosity*, by Methodist Pastor Adam Hamilton. And he writes convincingly about something we all know but like to avoid: that we have too much stuff, that we tend to want more and more stuff, and that we know deep down that our ultimate purpose and happiness are not dependent on how much stuff we have.

He cited Ben Franklin, who wrote: "Contentment makes poor men rich, but discontentment makes rich men poor."

I found myself thinking about the pollution in La Oroya, which exists because of the demand for all sorts of precious metals, to support humanity's ever-increasing desires for newer, faster, bigger, and better stuff.

Part of the reason for pollution in the world today is because too many of us want more and more stuff.

I'm hoping that seeds got planted in each of us, to help us find more faithful and more simple and more sustainable ways of living, to put less pressure on the earth's resources, so this big beautiful planet can survive.

For me it comes back to the call of the gospel—to recognize that God loves us and that we are called to love our neighbors, in sincere and concrete ways. We are called to follow Jesus, in striving for God's kingdom here on earth.

The concluding verse of the parable encourages us to be good soil, where God's word of love takes root and bears good fruit. "Let anyone with ears listen!" Amen.

